



Illinois Families Now & Forever®

Families by DCFS Foster Care, Adoption & Guardianship



Message from the DCFS acting director

Dear foster and adoptive families:

These past six months have not been easy – and the return to school, whether virtually, in-person or hybrid – brings a new set of challenges for families to navigate. This issue of Illinois Families Now and Forever® covers “news you can use” on topics ranging from making the decision to home school, employment and post-secondary education opportunities for youth and information about virtual parent café meetings and a new mobile app coming soon to help youth and their support teams stay connected. Thank you for everything you have done, and are doing, to ensure the youth in your home feel safe, happy and loved. We could not do this work without you.

Marc D. Smith
Acting Director

Department of Children and Family Services

DCFS Tuition and Fee Waiver Program aids with post- secondary education costs



DCFS offers a tuition and fee waiver program to current or former youth in care for the first five years that the youth is enrolled in their in-district community college or Illinois public university. The youth or former youth in care must meet the guidelines as an eligible student for the program. The eligible student, once enrolled, must maintain satisfactory progress toward completing his or her degree.

Additionally, the college or public university selected by the eligible student, must waive any tuition and fees that exceed the amounts paid to the eligible student through the federal Pell Grant Program or the State's Monetary Award Program.

Eligible students are youth for whom the department has court-ordered legal responsibility, youth who aged out of care at age 18 or older or youth formerly under care who have been adopted and were the subject of an adoption assistance agreement or who have been placed in private guardianship and were the subject of a subsidized guardianship agreement.

To receive a waiver, an eligible student must:

- Have earned a high school diploma from an accredited institution or a high school equivalency certificate or have met the state's criteria for high school graduation before the start of the school year for which the eligible student is applying for the waiver;
- Enroll in a qualifying post-secondary education before the eligible student reaches the age of 26;
- Apply for federal and state grant assistance by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid; and
- Submit a Tuition and Fee Waiver Application (CFS 438A) to the OETS via fax: 217-524-2101 or email: DCFS.TuitionWaiver@illinois.gov.

Youth leadership opportunities available with the Youth Advisory Board

Do you know of a youth in care between the ages of 14-21 looking to make a difference in the child welfare system? If so, encourage them to join the Youth Advisory Board! The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is a commissioned board that partners with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to provide advocacy by advising the DCFS director and the General Assembly on issues impacting youth in care. This is a large task, and for youth to fulfill the board's legislative mandate, there are skills they must possess. In order to ensure success, Be Strong Families developed a 12 module Youth Leadership Development curriculum that prepares youth to become advocates for transformative change.



Getting your youth and emerging adults involved in the Youth Advisory Board is a great opportunity for them to be part of something larger than themselves while making systemic change in child welfare. In addition to gaining both leadership and advocacy skills, YAB members will be making positive change that will impact themselves and other youth in care. The YAB also gives youth a unique opportunity to work in full partnership with caring adults. Through youth-adult partnerships, young people have

the chance to meet and make life-long connections with adults who value and respect their insight and perspective. YAB's adult partners work thoughtfully to ensure a safe physical, mental and emotional space that provides youth the best environment to reach their full potential as youth leaders and advocates. Now, more

than ever, the YAB team can guarantee a safe and healthy setting as all regional meetings have pivoted to meet remotely due to COVID-19, allowing youth to enjoy the many facets of the Youth Advisory Board from the comfort of their own homes.

For more information about YAB, please contact:
takeisha@bestrongfamilies.net or
stephen@bestrongfamilies.net

Foster parent support specialists keep families connected to support groups virtually

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families have been under increased stress and the need to connect with others has become increasingly important. Foster parent support groups statewide are continuing to meet virtually, allowing parents to come together, share a laugh, concerns and parenting tips – and most importantly reassure each other that they are not alone in this journey.

Cook County: Each of the three regions are conducting virtual Parent Cafés in conjunction with Be Strong Families on a monthly basis. These meetings address many of the stresses and concerns and provide recommendations and support regarding COVID-19.

Northern Region: Foster parent support group meetings are held jointly with virtual Parent Cafés twice monthly. Each of these meetings are open to all foster parents in the northern region. In addition, each FPSS staff also conducts monthly virtual meetings using Zoom and has regular contact with their assigned foster parents using social media for additional support.

Central Region: Central region has teamed up with Be Strong Families to host monthly virtual Parent Cafés. FPSS staff also utilize Zoom meetings allowing each of their assigned foster homes the opportunity to meet, share information and provide support regarding issues related to daycare needs, school issues and DCFS policy and initiatives during COVID-19.

Southern Region: Southern region is collaborating with Be Strong Families to provide monthly virtual Parent Cafés. FPSS staff also teamed with The Restore Network to help provide additional support resources and groups to foster parents in the southern region.

Foster parents interested in participating in a Be Strong Families Foster Parent Virtual Café can contact their caseworker to help them obtain information regarding virtual cafés scheduled in their area. Foster parents can contact DCFS.FPSS@illinois.gov for more information about local resources and information on support groups to strengthen and build family resiliency and many more support topics.

Employment Incentive Program eligibility expanded for adopted/guardianship youth



The Employment Incentive Program (EIP) is designed to provide financial and supplemental services to help eligible youth gain marketable skills through on-the-job work experience, job training programs or approved apprenticeships. On January 1, 2020, the EIP was expanded to provide youth in care, youth who aged out of care at age 18 and youth who went to an adoption or guardianship placement from the department's care and are participating in an approved apprenticeship program eligibility to the program. This program provides a \$210 initial payment for

start-up costs associated with tools, equipment and other work-related costs and a \$158 per month stipend for active participation in an approved apprenticeship training program.

The apprenticeship training program must be approved and recognized by the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) or by the United States Department of Labor (USDOL). Apprenticeship stipends shall be available for a maximum of five years after the youth enrolls in a qualifying program so long as the youth makes satisfactory progress towards completing his or her apprenticeship. Applicants must be under the age of 26 at time of enrollment in the apprenticeship program.

DCFS requires the following to qualify for initial and ongoing support:

- Young adults will submit a complete Employment Incentive Program

(EIP) application (CFS 449-2) to the Office of Education and Transition Services (OETS) with documentation of enrollment/acceptance/and start date for a qualifying apprenticeship program.

- Upon receipt of these documents OETS will verify that the youth is eligible for the program.
- Young adults must provide verification monthly that they are still engaged/enrolled in an apprenticeship program and making satisfactory progress.
- Young adults can enroll in the program by emailing or faxing documentation to the OETS via fax: 217-524-2101 or email: DCFS.officeofeducationandtransitionservices@illinois.gov
- Access to this program is not an entitlement and young adults can be removed for pay status for failure to cooperate, respond, or maintain adequate progress.



Foster Parent Self-Care Ideas

Sometimes, when caring for others we forget to take care of ourselves. So many of us let self-care go unattended because we sometimes confuse self-care with pampering and pampering with spending money. There are so many ways in which we can do little things that take care of our mind, body, and spirit, to address self-care without spending money or spending very little money.

Below are some simple ideas to think about for self-care that can be very beneficial:

- **Accept the things we cannot change**
- **Find a daily routine that works for you**
- **Keep a journal**
- **Get better sleep**
- **Take a walk and enjoy the outdoors**
- **Take time to self-reflect**
- **Take time off**
- **Take a break from electronic devices**
- **Talk to a therapist. A good therapist can help you cope with feelings and problem solving.**



Getting Started with YouthCare

A QUICK “HOW TO FIND A PROVIDER” GUIDE

Youth in the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) transitioned into the YouthCare Health Plan on September 1, 2020, joining former youth in care who transitioned to YouthCare on February 1. To find out if providers are in the YouthCare network, follow these tips:

- Visit <https://www.ilyouthcare.com/> and click on “Find a Provider” at the top of the page to find out if your provider is in the YouthCare Network.
- You can also contact your provider and ask if they are in the YouthCare Network. If your provider is in the YouthCare Network and refuses care, please call your caseworker, or YouthCare Member Services at 844-289-2264 or the DCFS Advocacy Office at 800-232-3798.
- Providers may know YouthCare by different names. If your provider does not know YouthCare, ask for any of these names: Foster Care, DCFS Care, Meridian, IlliniCare, youth in care or former youth in care.
- You can ask other questions when calling your doctor:
- I am looking for healthcare for my foster child(ren). Do you accept YouthCare insurance?
- Some providers may not know YouthCare, so you can say: “My foster child(ren)’s insurance is through Centene. Centene also used to be called Illinicare. It was also known as Meridian Medicaid. So if you participate with them for Medicaid, you would be able to see my child(ren) as well.”
- If they answer YES: Okay, thank you. So that means you can see my child. When can I make an appointment?
- If they answer NO: Okay, thank you. I will contact the insurance company and ask for them to follow up with you. Their website shows you as a participating Medicaid provider. You should contact YouthCare at 844-289-2264.

If you have any coverage or benefit questions, please call 844-289-2264 (TTY: 711) to reach the YouthCare Member Services team. You can also call the DCFS Advocacy Office at 800-232-3798 or email DCFS.HealthPlan@illinois.gov.

Source: https://www2.illinois.gov/dcfs/brighterfutures/healthy/Medicaid/Documents/YouthCare_How_to_Guide_081920.pdf

Can I make the decision to homeschool a youth in my care?



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the start of the school year to look very different this year, and families are exploring several different options for meeting the educational needs of the youth in their care, including homeschooling. For youth in care, homeschool requires caregivers to be responsible for developing and implementing a plan for home instruction that has the consent of the DCFS Guardianship Administrator, meets all requirements of the Illinois State Board of Education and complies with the Illinois School Code and other applicable laws.

The decision for our youth to be homeschooled and not receive the benefits of a public education is one that is taken very seriously. All requests for homeschooling will need to take into consideration the youth's home school district's plan for educating their students, the individual educational needs of our youth and caregiver concerns and capacity to support the education goals for our youth. The DCFS Guardian Administrator is the only person who can consent to

homeschooling a youth that is under DCFS guardianship.

A foster parent who would like to homeschool a youth in care must first notify the caseworker. The caseworker will complete a Home School Request Form and a list of documents to be attached, including:

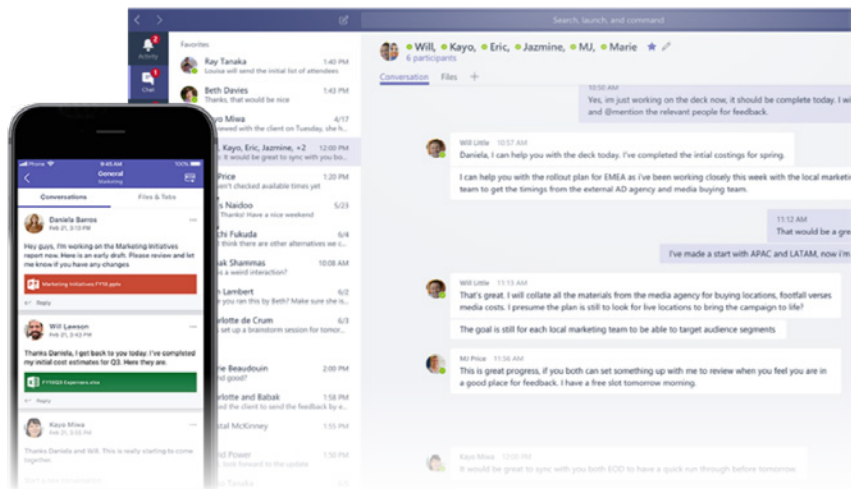
- A letter from the foster parent that includes plans to ensure social, emotional and physical activities are met
- A specific daily curriculum
- The most recent therapy report, which, if available should include the therapist's opinion on whether homeschooling is in the youth's best interest
- School report
- Current IEP or 504 plan
- The current permanency goal and status of progress towards that goal
- Letter from the youth, if age appropriate, that indicates their choice
- Any other supporting documents

The Home School Request Form and attachments will be reviewed by a DCFS regional education specialist and a team of DCFS staff and then submitted to the DCFS guardian for review and final decision. If the DCFS guardian grants permission to home school, the foster parents must agree to register with the local school district in which they are homeschooling the child and allow a DCFS education specialist to periodically visit to review the program and ensure that the child(ren)'s academic and behavioral needs are being met. The foster parents must also submit quarterly written documentation of the child's academic and behavioral achievement to the caseworker.



Coming soon: New Youth Teams app will keep youth in care, families and caseworkers connected

MICROSOFT TEAMS TRAINING WILL HELP LICENSED FOSTER PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS GET PREPARED



The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges for keeping youth in care connected to their families and caseworkers as in-person visitation was suspended, leaving foster parents, caseworkers and biological parents to come up with new and innovative ways to keep the lines of communication open. To help make communicating easier, Illinois DCFS has teamed up with Microsoft to create a new app, called Youth Teams, to keep youth in care connected to their support systems even after the pandemic is over and life returns to normal. Select DCFS and private agency intact family and permanency caseworkers have been involved in a Youth Teams pilot and are currently building “Youth Teams” for youth on their caseloads that will include the youth (when old enough to participate) and their identified support team (parents, foster parents, caregivers, siblings and providers).

Once connected, everyone on the Youth Team will be able to:

- Easily chat via text, audio and video to stay connected and support the youth
- Participate in informal and scheduled meetings and receive automated meeting reminders
- Collaborate and share information wherever you are while protecting sensitive information

In anticipation of the fall 2020 rollout of Youth Teams, Illinois DCFS is offering Microsoft Teams training to licensed foster parents who have a VTC account so caregivers will be ready when they are invited to join the youth's team.

To enroll in Microsoft Teams Level 100 training, please go to the Virtual Training Center (www.dcfstraining.org) and follow these steps:

- Enter your VTC Login ID and Password then click on **Enter**
- Click on **Events and Registration**
- On the right side of the screen, click on **On-Demand Training Catalog**
- Enter “MICROSOFT” in the Course Name field
- Click on **Search** at the bottom of the screen
- Click on **Register**

More information about the Youth Teams app will be coming soon as the pilot ends and more caseworkers begin to create Teams for the youth on their caseloads.

November is Adoption Awareness Month



Everyone is connected to adoption in some way. This November we'll be asking you to show us your connection. Below is Governor Pritzker's official proclamation making November Adoption Awareness month. Follow Illinois DCFS on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) to get involved!





**Illinois Families
Now & Forever**

J B Pritzker, Governor

Marc D Smith,
DCFS Acting Director

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Department of Children & Family Services
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Inside this issue:

- Pages 1 Message from the DCFS acting director
 DCFS Tuition and Fee Waiver Program aids with post-secondary education costs
- Page 2 Youth Advisory Board
 Foster Parent Support Specialists
- Page 3 Employment Incentive Program
 Foster Parent Self-Care Ideas
- Page 4 Getting started with YouthCare
- Page 5 Can I make the decision to homeschool a youth in my care?
- Page 6 New Youth Teams app
- Page 7 Adoption Awareness Month

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GET READY FOR THE FLU SEASON

Find a clinic near you. Everyone six months of age and older should get a flu vaccine every year.

Find a clinic near you:

<https://vaccinefinder.org/>

